

A Way Out of No Way  
 Genesis 22: 1-19  
 Fifth in the sermon Series “Faith Journeys”  
 First Federated Church  
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Today’s lesson is one of the most abhorrent stories in the Bible. It makes parents shudder. It makes everyone wonder about this “god of love” the followers of Jesus talk so much about. How could a loving God ever put a father in the position that Abraham is put in in this morning’s text? In order to get a handle on the story, we first must understand the context in which it was written. Context is one of Life’s most important things.

For example, During the month of April, 1940, in the small Iowa community of Danville, fourteen-year-old Betty Ann Wagner and her younger sister Juanita received a letter in the mail from a new pen pal. It bore a rather unusual stamp. It was postmarked “*The Netherlands.*”

With great excitement they tore open the feather light tissue thin envelope and read about another young girl who lived nearly half a world away. The pen pal could not write in English so her father penned the letter in blue ink on lighter blue paper. As the young European teen told of her life, Betty Ann and Juanita caught a glimpse of another world.

One of the things that their new pen pal wrote said in part:

*We often listen to the radio as times are very exciting, having a frontier with Germany and being a small country we never feel safe.*

Reading the letter in the relative security of their Des Moines County, Iowa farm home the significance of those words did not sink in to either Betty Ann nor Juanita. Excitedly the two sisters wrote an immediate reply. A couple of days later—before their own letter could have possibly reached the Netherlands—they received a second letter from their pen pal. And *that* was the last that they ever heard from her. All of their subsequent letters went unanswered.

While they were disappointed, they concluded that the War had merely made correspondence impossible. They didn’t realize *how* true that was. It never dawned upon them that their friend was Jewish. Nor did they have any idea of the horrors that she faced until *after* the war.

In 1946 Mary Ann found the old address in Amsterdam. On a whim she wrote another letter to her pen pal and mailed it to the old address. Weeks later they got a reply. Their pen pal’s father wrote of the family’s hardship during the War years. He also wrote of his daughter’s death in a Nazi concentration camp.

In 1956 Betty Ann Wagner read a stage play of her pen pal’s wartime diary and she wept for it was only then that she realized that her pen pal was none other than Anne Frank!

Mary Anne Wagner did not fully understand the meaning of Anne Frank’s two letters because she had not read them in the same context in which they were written. There is a human tendency to read something *not* in the context in which it is written, but in the context in which it is received. One of the dangers that is innate in human communication is that what we are intending to say is not always what is being heard.

Recall the land to which Abraham was called, back when his name was “Abram” and he left his home and “father’s people.” “They set forth to go to the land of Canaan.” (Genesis 12:5) Canaan was a land known for their fertility gods. Child sacrifice was a well established

custom. In the story of Abraham's "offering" of Isaac, the writer was transforming the custom of the culture into a teachable moment for the heirs of Abraham. This is not new. For example, in teaching the faith to their children, Christians transformed the pagan celebration of the winter solstice and used it to teach about the birth of the Savior.

In the case of our story, the message is loud and clear: God does not want human sacrifice. Rather, in the words of the Apostle Paul, God wants "living sacrifices:" *I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. (Romans 12:1)* John Calvin, whose 500th birthday was commemorated last year, embraced this when he developed his crest; an open hand offering a flaming heart--a heart on fire for God.

In our exploration of faith journeys, today's lesson reminds us of the importance of trusting in God.

Today's lesson is Abraham's third test on his faith journey. So quickly we forget the promises of God. Shortly after the call to leave the land of his father--within the same chapter as his call--Abraham passed Sarah off as his sister! It is true that she was his half-sister (Genesis 20:12) but she was also his wife! You know, there is no lie as attractive as a half-truth!

Here's how it happened. When the king of Egypt took a shine to Sarah, Abraham gave her to him rather than risk his life to defend her as his wife! He thought to himself, "If the king knows that I am her husband, he could simply have me killed and take her for himself." He didn't see anyway out of this mess so he simply passed her off as his sister.

The king was overjoyed. As he prepared for his marriage to Sarah he dealt generously with Abraham. He dealt generously with him, that is, until God intervened and saved the situation. The king confronted Abraham with his lie, told him to take his wife Sarah as well as his entire family and leave Egypt immediately.

A few years later Abraham was faced with another test. Sarah and he were unable to conceive. Sarah decided to engage the help of a surrogate mother--her handmaid or slave Hagar. She told Abraham about her plan and if you were here a couple of weeks ago you may remember what happened. Hagar conceived Abraham's baby. Perhaps it is needless to say, but things did not go so well.

Once again Abraham stumbled in his faith journey. He wasn't sure that God could be trusted to keep promises.

Years later we have the events of today's lesson. The lesson says that "after these things God tested Abraham." The voice of God spoke to Abraham. "Abraham!" "Here I am" Abraham replied. "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you."

The images of what happens next is too difficult to bear. Abraham gets up early the next morning, before anyone else is stirring, saddles his donkey and takes Isaac and two young servants to the mountains of Moriah. Once there, the conversation between the boy Isaac and his father tears at the heart.

When they reach their destination Abraham tells the two servants to stay with the donkey. Isaac and he are going over there to worship. He turns to Isaac and gave him the wood for the burnt offering. Abraham carried the flint and knife.

"Father," Isaac said to his dad.

"Yes, my son."

"We have flint and wood, but where's the lamb for the burnt offering?"

“The LORD will provide us the offering,” Abraham replied.

Abraham and Isaac lay down the wood. Abraham takes the boy and binds him like a lamb before laying him on the pyre of wood. If they said anything, we have no record of it. I imagine that Abraham was on automatic pilot, not thinking, just doing. It must have all seemed like a dream, a horrible nightmare. As he raised the knife an angel of the LORD called to Abraham again, urgently. “Abraham! Abraham!” “Here I am,” Abraham replied. “Do NOT harm the boy. Untie him. I now know how fearlessly you fear God.”

As Abraham untied Isaac out of the corner of his eye he saw an unblemished ram caught by the horns in a thicket. Abraham took the ram and offered the sacrifice. And he called that place “*Jehovah-jireh*” or “the LORD will provide.”

There is a saying that comes out of the African-American pulpit; “a way out of no way.” God will provide a way out of no way.

Do you remember the movie “Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade?” In it Indiana Jones, played by Harrison Ford, tries to save the life his father, played by Sean Connery, who is suffering from a gunshot wound. In order to get to his father, Indy must cross a chasm in an underground cavern. In order to cross this final chasm Indy must walk in the “name of God.” With no visible way to get across the chasm, Indiana Jones recalls the words of Scripture given to him earlier; *Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. (Hebrews 11:1)*

He takes a deep breath, repeats those words to himself and takes a step into the emptiness of the unknown. Miraculously with each step into nothingness a flagstone step emerges.

A few years ago as I was trying to understand the “DNA” of First Federated Church, I listened to sermons delivered by former pastors. One of the sermons, “No Faith, No Church” (January 24, 1988) was delivered by Associate Pastor Dr. Tom Triebel. In it he talked about a conversation that he had with a college student one summer when the two of them were at a week-long camp at Pilgrim Park. The college student was seriously thinking about going to seminary but this was a summer of a faith crisis. He said that there was a void in his life. “I’m not sure I have faith,” he told Pastor Triebel. “I’m not sure that I really believe.”

As they walked along it occurred to Pastor Triebel to ask a very simple but profound question. Speaking in the spirit of love he asked quite simply, “What would you do with more faith now if you had it?”

I imagine the young man was stunned. After all, that is not the kind of question you would expect from a pastor. But Pastor Triebel went on to say to the fellow, that he really had very few needs that required faith. His father and mother were paying for his college education. He was surrounded by a faculty that cared about him. He had a home that he could go back to whenever he wanted. It seemed as if all the things that the young man needed were already being provided. So the question was not out of line. “What would you do if you had more faith now? What would you need it for?”

Pastor Triebel went on to reflect in that sermon that there seems to be an economy of scale with God when it comes to faith. “It is only when we attempt great things *for* God that we can expect great faith *from* God.” If we are content with the money game or the status game, or whatever game life invites us to play, we don’t need more faith for that. If, however, we are trying to move the mountains of the world--apathy, injustice, hunger, peace, want, things like that--we will find the faith necessary to meet the challenge. “We know as we go” he said. “If we do not go, we shall not know.”

This is the last faith story of Abraham that we will explore. I'm afraid that the year does not provide us the time to take the opportunity to walk farther with "Father Abraham," nor will we walk with Isaac, to any great extent. But if we have learned nothing else from Abraham I hope that we have learned three things. I hope that we have learned that following the call of God means that we will leave behind the ways of the comfortable past. I hope that we have learned that no matter how impossible something may look, God keeps His promises. And, I hope that today, we have learned that God can provide a way out of no way. When it comes to God, there is an economy of scale in faith; we know as we go. "If we do not go, than we shall not know."

To God be the glory.